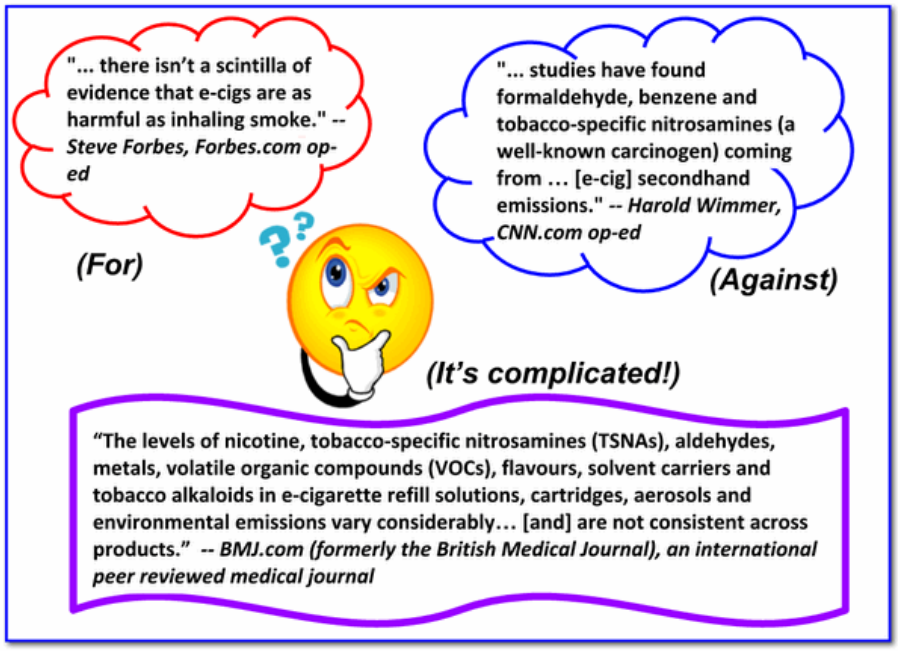
Media-Induced Ignorance & How to Neutralize It

Posted on March 14, 2016 by Mike

The Problem: The Truth is Out There, But It Frequently Takes Time & Effort to Comprehend.

Here's an assertion that some might find irritating: **Sometimes there is a right answer** — an accurate, defensibly true description of reality. And despite what bloggers & media talking heads would have us believe, **not everything is subject to debate!**

Unfortunately, however, that right answer — that observable, provable truth — usually isn't as emotionally engaging, as provocative, as fun or as easily packaged into one of those viral memes that get so much attention. The graphic below illustrates the problem:


"... there isn't a scintilla of evidence that e-cigs are as harmful as inhaling smoke." -- *Steve Forbes, Forbes.com op-ed*
(For)
"... studies have found formaldehyde, benzene and tobacco-specific nitrosamines (a well-known carcinogen) coming from … [e-cig] secondhand emissions." -- *Harold Wimmer, CNN.com op-ed*
(Against)
(It's complicated!)
"The levels of nicotine, tobacco-specific nitrosamines (TSNAs), aldehydes, metals, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), flavours, solvent carriers and tobacco alkaloids in e-cigarette refill solutions, cartridges, aerosols and environmental emissions vary considerably… [and] are not consistent across products." -- *BMJ.com (formerly the British Medical Journal), an international peer reviewed medical journal*

Are e-cigarettes safe? The simple, op-ed answer (pick your favorite!): "Yes" or "No." The scientific, but boring and hard-on-your-brain, answer: "It's complicated…"

As you can see, the op-ed quotes above are more appealing than the carefully worded quote from the peer reviewed scientific journal. Why? The op-eds make their points quickly and confidently. They don't attempt to deal with the nuances or subtleties required by the scientists. They also skip over the stuff that we might find boring… or *(worse!?)*… the stuff that would take us time and effort to think about. And, finally, what may be most compelling about these op-ed quotes is that we can pick our favorite and repeat it (along with the respected brand name of the publisher) to defend our chosen behavior of either smoking or not smoking e-cigarettes.

The sad bottom line: ***A partial truth is often more easily engaged, accepted and circulated than the more complicated and nuanced whole truth!***

The trade-off, of course, is that **in exchange for our steady fast-food diet of partial truths and catchy memes we are kept in a perpetual state of media-induced ignorance.** This ignorance, in turn, leads us to making bad decisions such as buying semi-useful/semi-harmful products, doing trendy but ineffectual things in the name of our health and beauty, electing semi-ignorant (or ignorance-manipulating) candidates who back half-baked public policies, etc., etc.

Below is **a sampling of subjects that trigger blogger- or editorial-driven pseudo-controversies.** Typically, the arguments surrounding these are supported by facts carefully "cherry picked" from scientific journals.

- Vaccinations, immunizations for kids
- Medical marijuana
- Milk products & health
- Corporate tax rates & jobs
- Anti-aging products & practices
- Vegetarianism
- Organic versus chemical-based farming
- Gun deaths/gun control & violence/crime
- Causes of & treatments for cancer
- Death penalty
- Women's health & abortion
- Cures for cancer, heart disease, etc.
- Tablets versus textbooks for students
- Cell phone safety

With Zillions of Bloggers & Media Outlets, Any Crazy Opinion WILL Be Supported Somewhere!

The gift — and the curse — of the world wide web is that you can easily find many more sources of information than you can ever consult. So, depending on how you phrase your search question, you are likely to discover lots of sources to support your preconceived opinion, no matter how inaccurate or outrageous it may be.

So **before you begin your search, you might want to ask yourself if you're really looking for truth.** *And that might take a little soul searching to clarify!* However, if you are certain you want to find the truth **here's the challenge you face:**

> *You must distinguish the scientific (i.e., genuinely truth-oriented) sources from the sources that are driven by opinions, political agendas, advertising dollars or the need to oversimplify or "dumb down" the message for a lazy, click-happy audience.*

Infographic: Scientific Journals versus Blog Posts, News Reports & Editorials

The infographic below illustrates how the neutral findings presented in scientific journal articles can be morphed into the building blocks of blog- or editorial-driven debates.

Blog Posts, News Reports & Editorials

SCIENTISTS

* Use the "scientific method" ++
* Rigorously gather data, check facts
* Explore subtle shades of grey
* Describe findings in depth, with carefully-worded nuance
* Check (and challenge!) each others' work
* Can be BORING!

SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL ARTICLES

* Report LOTS of detail
* Describe subtle shades of grey, nuances in meaning
* Carefully describe conclusions & "truth"
* Provide "abstracts" as summaries that "get to the point"
* Are "peer reviewed," so authors can be challenged by other scientists & experts
* Can be BORING!

BLOG POSTS, NEWS REPORTS & EDITORIALS

The Good News:

* Usually easy to read or watch
* Designed to be provocative, stimulating or fun
* Can make readers feel good about themselves when authors target specific audience biases
* Sometimes accurately distill the scientific findings and make them more understandable

Bloggers or "reporters" may be working a particular agenda

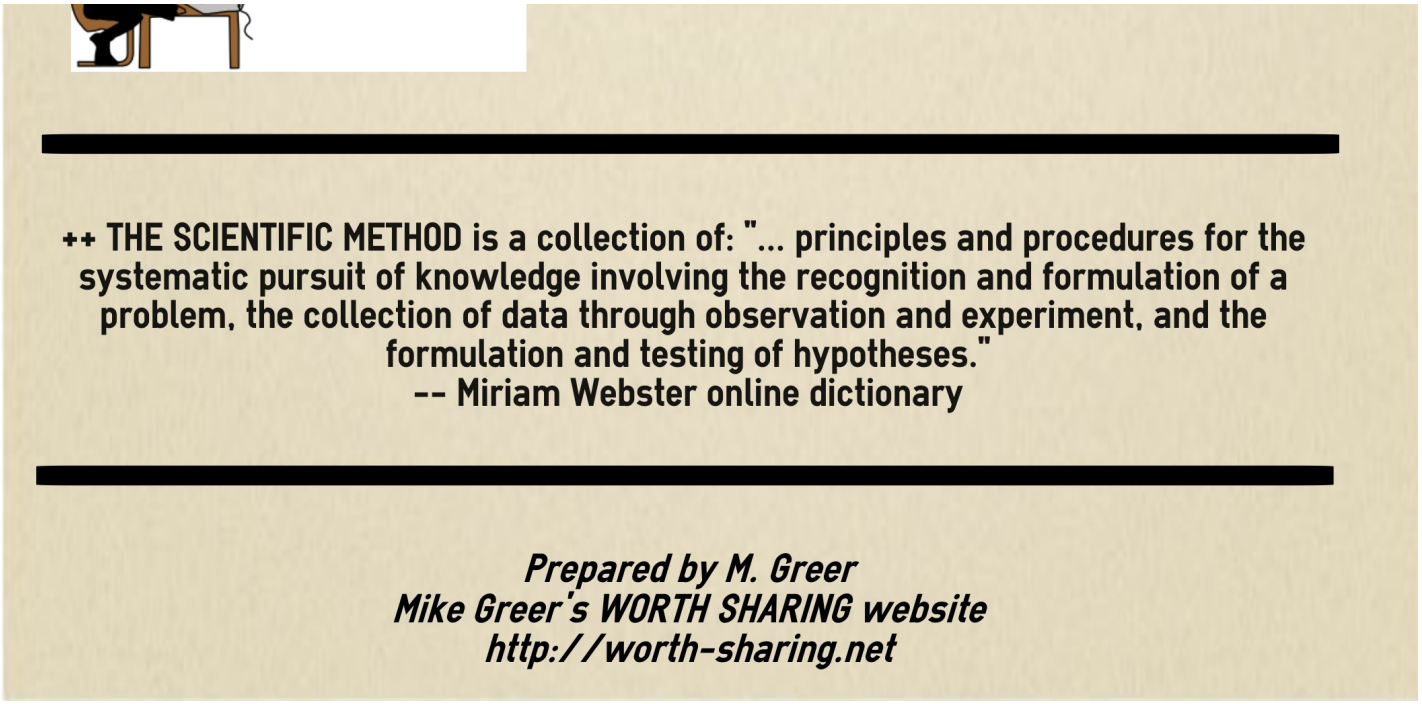
The Bad News

* Often "cherry pick" data to support an agenda
* Can exploit reader biases, skewing facts to match
* Can be overly sensational to get more "eyeballs" on the page or screen and to generate sound bites for social media
* Often NO peer or editorial review, so nobody challenges assumptions (Can be a single author's opinion)
* "Truth" as described by the scientists can be lost or badly distorted when the shades of grey (the boring stuff!) disappear

Who can I believe?

Maybe I should read the scientific journal article for myself... or at least read the abstract...

Think about this: ANYONE can become a blogger... ANYONE! (No peer review necessary!... Yikes!!)


++ THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD is a collection of: "... principles and procedures for the systematic pursuit of knowledge involving the recognition and formulation of a problem, the collection of data through observation and experiment, and the formulation and testing of hypotheses."
-- Miriam Webster online dictionary
Prepared by M. Greer
Mike Greer's WORTH SHARING website
http://worth-sharing.net

As the infographic implies, the age-old advice, “Consider the source!” is critical if you are seeking the truth!

The “How” & “Why” of Scientific Research Reports Versus Blog Posts, News Reports & Editorials

Another way to get at the validity of any media source is to examine the dynamics of its writing or production process. Specifically, *we need to ask:*

> ***How is this source created and what follow-up actions does it advocate?***

The table below compares scientific research reports, as opposed to blog posts, news reports and editorials, in terms of these characteristics:

- Overall purpose
- Creation strategy
- Who reviews prior to publication
- Purpose of pre-publication reviews
- Dealing with bias
- Follow up actions advocated

The "How" & "Why" of Scientific Research Reports Versus Blog Posts, News Reports & Editorials		
Characteristic	**Research Report in a Respected, Peer-Reviewed Scientific Journal**	**Blog Post or News Article or Editorial (Op-ed)**
Overall Purpose	• Share research results (i.e., results of experiment or scientific analysis). • Make recommendations based on results.	• Present a finished product that readers of the publication will find provocative, stimulating and/or consistent with their values and interests.
Creation strategy	• Review the researcher's methodology for gathering data. • Examine & summarize the data gathered. • Carefully distinguish defensible facts from speculations. • Present conclusions based on data.	• Determine a theme or "point" to be made. • Find research, quotes, or other articles that support the theme or "point." • Weave the supporting ideas together as a well-written entity.
Who Reviews Prior to Publication	• Senior scientists (widely respected peers of the researchers) who are on the editorial board of the journal • Senior scientists who have deep knowledge of the broad domain or field of study in which the research was completed	• *(large publication)* Editor, senior mgt., marketing, etc. • *(small publication)* Editor • *(one-person publication, blog, etc.)* Often no one, aside from the writer him- or herself
Purpose of Pre-publication Reviews	• Make sure the research methodology, data analysis, and conclusions drawn are scientifically defensible. • Assure that the report meets the standards of the publication so that its reputation as a credible source is maintained.	• Quality assure the writing and make substantive corrections in grammar, punctuation, flow, structure, etc. • Suggest ways to improve the work so that it is more appealing to consumers (graphics, charts, brief explanations, side bars, etc.).
Dealing with bias	• Carefully seek out any evidence of bias and challenge the author to re-think or re-write. • Refuse publication if bias is proven.	Bias may be subtly (or overtly) encouraged by the following: • Readers'/consumers' expectations • Author's "world view" in selecting a theme or "point" • Publication's market niche & advertiser expectations
Follow-up Actions Advocated	• Recommend further research to explore unanswered questions raised by the results. • Seek a more rigorous, defensible truth through further analysis.	• Buy or don't buy, support or don't support, or otherwise take some kind of personal action based on the theme. • Get readers to share with friends ("spread the word"). • Ask readers to become politically active. (Rally, demonstrate, write your congressman, etc.)

From Ignorance to Informed Consumption: Questions to Ask of Your Sources

The infographic and the table above show, in broad terms, some of the forces that are pushing and shoving to elbow out the truth. As you can see, bloggers, authors and media producers are spending lots of energy to get your

attention and "make a case" for or against _____ *[insert topic du jour]*. This means that if you want to discover the truth for yourself, you will need to "push back" and spend some energy. And while this might be a bit of a pain, you will be rewarded with a deeper understanding of reality and the confidence that you are making more informed choices.

So how can you analyze a specific media source to see if it's going to help you find the truth? The checklist below can help.

Checklist: How to Neutralize Media-Induced Ignorance

Before you begin:

The first step in neutralizing media-inflicted ignorance is to look inward. **Ask yourself:** ***Am I really looking for the truth? Or am I looking to find support for an opinion I already hold or to get ammunition for an argument I want to win?***

Then, if you're really seeking the truth, ***follow these steps to find potentially hidden agendas of any blog post, news article, podcast or media production:***

Step 1 — Ask: Who's the publisher or producer? See the "About" section of the website or the credits at the end of a media production, the author's by-line, etc.

Step 2 — Ask: What are the credentials of the website owners, the article or blog post authors, the video producers, etc.? Do a quick Google search and check biographical sources for education, professional affiliations, other publications created, etc.

Step 3 — Ask: What are the political affiliations of the author, publisher or producer? Again, a quick Google search may be all you need. Example search term: "____*[person's name]*: politics"

Step 4 — Ask: Who might the publisher be "beholden" to? Is the website or production sponsored entirely or in part by a particular organization? Again, check the "About" section of the website or the credits listed in a media production.

Step 5 — Ask: What is the publisher/website/producer selling? In other words, follow the money! Who's paying the bills? Who is listed as a sponsor? What are the sponsors selling? What are readers, listeners, or viewers encouraged to buy? Are donations encouraged and who gets these donations?

Step 6 — Ask: What are the advertisers selling? For example, if a website or media production is laced with advertising for vitamin supplements, the producers may be less likely to publish content that is anti-vitamin supplement. So check out the advertisers and think about how they might influence the content that is released.

Step 7 — For science-based content, ask: Can I find and review the original scientific journal… or at least the abstract or summary? Tip: Phrase your Google search like this: "scholarly journal article: [_____ *(topic)*]" or go to Google Scholar. *(Tip: Sharpen your analytical skills with suggestions from Kyle Hill: What is a Good Study?: Guidelines for Evaluating Scientific Studies)*

Step 8 — For controversial social or political content, ask: What do the "fact checking" sources say

about the truth of the left/right assertions?
Some good fact checking sources include:

- ProCon.org
- Factcheck.org
- Politifact.com
- Snopes.com (*Is it true or simply "urban rumor?")*

Conclusion

Phony left/right debates and self-aggrandizing echo chambers aside, sometimes there are actual, indisputable facts and bits of undeniable evidence that support an assertion. And ***despite what our Facebook friends might think, everything is NOT subject to debate*** — at least not subject to debate by the ill-informed using unproven assertions that amount to easily-aggregated, single-flavored collections of opinion.

Yes. The truth is out there. And you can discover it for yourself if you are willing to spend a little time and energy.

==== See Also ====

- Curate Your Own News: Why You Should & How You Can
- Why It's Pointless to Argue About Politics or Religion
- Balancing Authority & Responsibility: It's the Fair & Decent Thing to Do!
- Forgive Them. It's Just Their Inner Chihuahua.
- Meditation Fact Sheet: Scientifically Proven Benefits & a Who's Who of Famous Meditators
- Worth Sharing: On PMBOK, Post-It Notes, Dog Pooh, Project Post Mortems, Meditation, Sign-offs, Pelicans & ADHD

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